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The Bayeux Tapestry and the Vikings¹

By Shirley Ann Brown, York University, Toronto

In 1958, Hollywood produced *The Vikings*, a blockbuster featuring first-rank stars like Kirk Douglas, Tony Curtis, Janet Leigh, and Ernest Borgnine. The director, Richard Fleischer, wanted the utmost authenticity, so he filmed the action in the fjords of Norway. One of the intriguing aspects of the film's visuals was the rolling credits at the beginning and end of the movie for which the Bayeux Tapestry served as the basis.



Figure 1: Opening credits from *The Vikings*, Metro Goldwyn Mayer, 1958.

¹ This article is an expansion of a paper originally read in French for the colloquium “La Tapisserie de Bayeux: une chronique des temps vikings?” held 29-30 March 2007 in Bayeux, organized by Sylvette Lemagnen, Conservateur of the Bayeux Tapestry. I would like to thank Eric Eydoux and Jean-Marie Levesque, Conservateur of the Musée de Normandie, for drawing my attention to the 1996 exhibition *Dragons et drakkars, le mythe viking de la Scandinavie à la Normandie* and its excellent accompanying publication. I should also like to draw attention to the conference: “The Bayeux Tapestry: An Embroidered Chronicle from Viking Times” held at the National Museum, Copenhagen, Denmark in February 2006.

Images closely adapted from the Embroidery prepare the audience for the story to come: Viking ships on their way to attack England, where the king sits enthroned, and the clergy pray for protection from the savagery of the Northmen.



Figure 1A

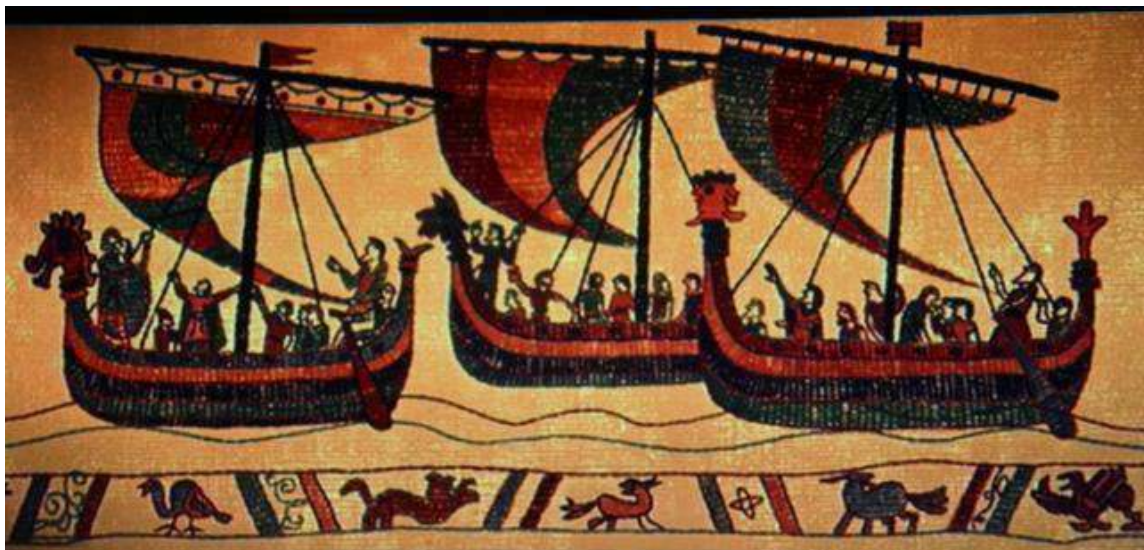


Figure 1B



Figure 2: Ships on the way to England. Second image is a detail from the Bayeux Tapestry – 11th Century and reproduced by special permission of the City of Bayeux from the Bayeux Tapestry.



Figure 2A



Figure 3: Enthroned King. Detail from the Bayeux Tapestry – 11th Century by special permission of the City of Bayeux.



Figure 3A



Figure 4: Clergy praying. Detail from the Bayeux Tapestry – 11th Century by special permission of the City of Bayeux.

In the final credits, there are many more borrowings from the Tapestry. It is interesting that none of the credit images are based on the actual battle sequences in the Embroidery and that there is no reference to the Bayeux Tapestry as the source of the imagery. In the movie itself, there is a wall hanging in the Viking leader's hall, suspended behind the feasting table. This hanging, while not borrowing images from the Bayeux embroidery, is about the same proportions and format – a long and narrow strip with a central frieze and upper and lower borders.

How did the Bayeux Tapestry, with its images of Normans and Englishmen, come to be so strongly equated with the legendary Vikings in the popular imagination? And in the United States, where familiarity with medieval European history and art is not one of

the major concerns of the school curriculum? Perhaps the designer of the movie's credits had visited Bayeux in the 1950s and, having seen the Tapestry when it was exhibited in its former home in the Bishop's Palace, decided it would serve his purpose. Perhaps he was familiar with a book on the Bayeux Tapestry, something like the comprehensive study edited by Sir Frank Stenton which first appeared in 1956. We will never know if he was aware of the long and convoluted history which links Scandinavia, the Vikings, and the Bayeux Tapestry.

The question of the relationship between Scandinavia, the Vikings, the Norman Conquest of England, and the Bayeux Tapestry, has been discussed from the viewpoint of archaeology and art. It is equally necessary to investigate it from the standpoint of national attitudes and interests, for it is possible to interpret the Bayeux Tapestry, the Anglo-Saxons, and the Vikings as nineteenth-century century creations. The ways we look at these phenomena and the questions we ask of them were formulated during the post-Napoleonic period when national identity was a major concern, and many European countries were reconstructing their own early histories.

* * *

The Bayeux Tapestry depicts certain carefully chosen events from the years 1064 to 1066. In the embroidery images, and in modern English-language history books, the Battle of Hastings and the ensuing "Norman" Conquest of England are most often described as a bloody encounter between the Normans and their allies on the one side and the Anglo-Saxons on the other, with the prize being the crown of Anglo-Saxon England.

Harold Godwinson (also spelled Godwinsson) is described as the “Last Anglo-Saxon King,”² and the Conquest as “The Death of Anglo-Saxon England.”³

The term *Anglo-Saxon* was coined to refer to the Germanic Saxons in Britain before the Norman Conquest in distinction from the continental Saxons.⁴ The implication subsequently developed is that it was a purely Germanic kingdom and people that William of Normandy overcame, a kingdom established during the reign of Cerdic, king of sixth-century Wessex. This notion had been incubating since the Reformation and developed into full form during the nineteenth-century rewriting of English history. It reflects the then current cultural and political antagonisms between post-revolutionary France and England, and the leanings of the Hanoverian monarchy to emphasize the Germanic aspect of English history. It was then that the term *Anglo-Saxon* came to predominate. The term was not entirely unknown in the early Middle Ages, for King Alfred the Great, is reputed to have been the first monarch to style himself “*rex Anglorum Saxonum*” or “*rex Angul-Saxonum*.”⁵ But generally, the inhabitants of Great Britain referred to themselves as either “*Saxones*” or “*Angli*.” The Bayeux Tapestry inscriptions refer to Harold as “*Dux Anglorum*” and “*Rex Anglorum*”,

² Edward Bulwer Lytton, *Harold the Last of the Saxon Kings* (1848), and more recently, Ian Walker, *Harold: The Last Anglo-Saxon King* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 1997).

³ N. J. Higham, *The Death of Anglo-Saxon England* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 1997).

⁴ The term *Angli Saxones* seems to have first been used in continental writing in the latter part of the 8th century by Paul the Deacon, historian of the Lombards, to distinguish the English Saxons from the continental Saxons. The first printed edition, in 1692, of the group of annals narrating the early history of Great Britain was called *Chronicum saxonicum*.

⁵ This title is attested in Asser’s *Life of Alfred*. See *Alfred the Great: Asser’s Life of King Alfred and Other Contemporary Sources*, eds. and trans. Simon Keynes and Michael Lapidge (London: Penguin, 1983).

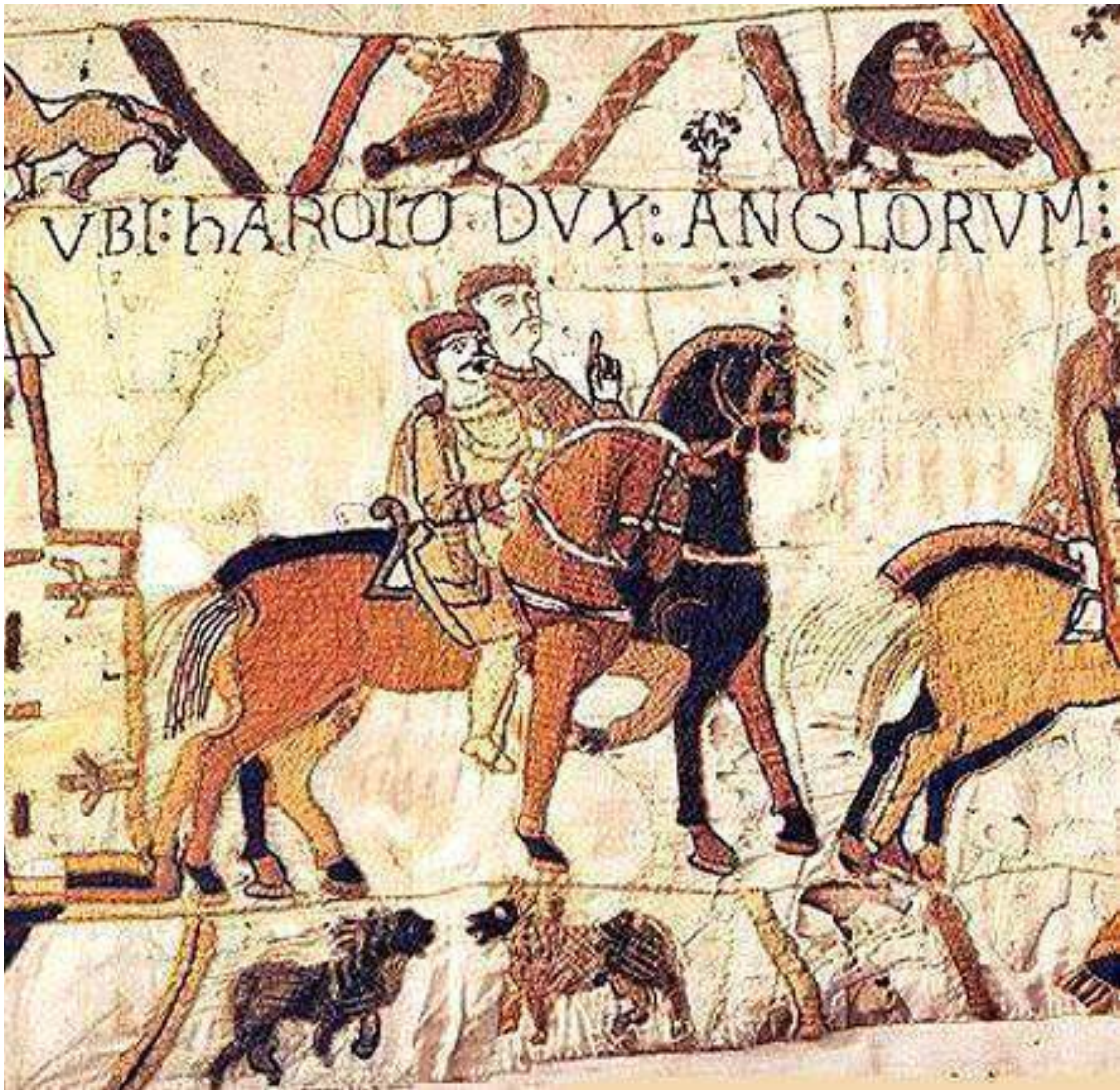


Figure 5: Harold labeled as *Dux Anglorum*. Detail from the Bayeux Tapestry – 11th Century by special permission of the City of Bayeux.



Figure 6: Harold labeled as Rex Anglorum. Detail from the Bayeux Tapestry – 11th Century by special permission of the City of Bayeux.

furnishing a term which better translates into “English” rather than “Anglo-Saxon” and undoubtedly was meant to refer to the people over whom Harold ruled, whatever their cultural background.

The eleventh-century reality was very different from the Victorian construct. As Ian Howard recently pointed out, William of Normandy subjugated an Anglo-Danish

England, not a purely Anglo-Saxon kingdom.⁶ Since the incursions of the Vikings along the English coasts at the end of the eighth century, followed by the settlement of Danish raiders after 867, and the establishment of the Danelaw in 879 in the peace treaty between King Alfred and Guthrum, the Danish leader, the Danes had been a recognized entity in Great Britain. Danish ambition to the English throne materialized when Swein Forkbeard, King of Denmark and Norway, successfully invaded England and was recognized as King on Christmas Day, 1013. Under his son Cnut, the Anglo-Danish kingdom expanded and soon encompassed England, Denmark, Norway, and part of modern Sweden. England remained under Danish kings for almost thirty years – Cnut, Harold Harefoot, and Harthacnut – during which time the focus of the island turned to the north and east rather than to the continent across the Channel.

It was during Cnut's reign that Earl Godwin rose to power, serving with the king in Danish campaigns. By 1023 he had become the wealthiest and most powerful of the earls. About that time, he married the Danish heiress Gytha, a close relative through marriage to Cnut and herself descended from the Danish and Swedish royal families.

⁶ Ian Howard, "Harold II: A Throne-Worthy King," *King Harold II and the Bayeux Tapestry* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2005), 35.

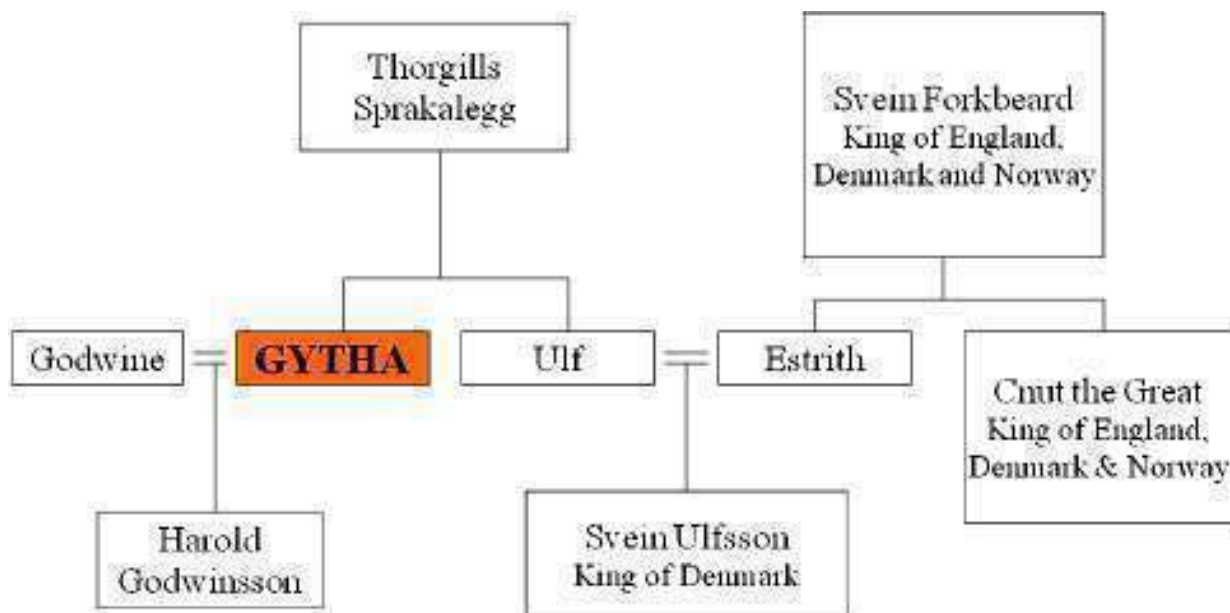


Figure 7: Genealogy table.

Godwin's marriage to Gytha produced a large family, and the names of their children reflected this multi-cultural context: three of their sons were given Scandinavian names: Sweyn, Tostig, Harold; two daughters were called Gytha and Gunhild. Gytha took the anglicized form Ealdgyth (Edith) when she married King Edward in 1042. The other four children were given English names: Gyrth, Leofwine, Wulfnoth, and Aelfgifu. Marriages had made Harold Godwinson a first cousin of Swein Ulfsson, King of Denmark, who was himself one of the contenders for the English throne upon the death of King Edward. After Hastings, three of Harold's children, Harold, Gytha, and Magnus, all bearing Danish names, took refuge with Swein Ulfsson in Denmark.

It is generally written that Harold Godwinson had no dynastic claim to the English throne other than the dubious distinction of being Edward's brother-in-law. This conclusion perhaps reflects the Victorian view of the purely Germanic/Saxon nature of pre-Conquest England, following from the concept that Edward's reign had heralded a return to the line of Cerdic. The claims on the English succession made by Swein

Ulfsson of Denmark, (1019-76) and Harald Hardrada of Norway (1015-66) establish that the Scandinavian claims were not dead in 1066. Harold Godwinson (1022-66), through his mother's lineage, had a claim on the throne through the Danish line, stretching back to Swein Forkbeard and Cnut. That, along with the fact that he had become the most powerful man in England, probably led the Witan to support his candidacy.

Swein, King of Denmark, was not in a position to press his claim to the English throne at the time of Edward's death. Harald Hardrada of Norway had no dynastic claim but instead based his campaign on a supposed agreement between his nephew, King Magnus of Norway, and King Harthacanute of England whereby if either died without heir, the other would inherit both England and Norway. This would have been made during Harthnacnut's short reign between 1040 and 1042. Harald Hardrada's claim is suspiciously similar in nature to that made by William of Normandy's propagandists who claimed that Edward had promised William the throne many years earlier, should he die childless. Spurred on by Harold Godwinson's malcontent brother Tostig, it would be Harald Hardrada who would make the first move after Edward's death. He landed his forces in the north of England, and, although initially victorious at the Battle of Fulford on September 20, he would lose against Harold Godwinson five days later at Stamford Bridge. But the fighting in the North would deplete the energy of Harold's men and would, in the end, contribute to his defeat at Hastings.

Scandinavian aspirations for the English throne did not end at Stamford Bridge. Swein Ulfsson mounted assaults on England in 1069-70. Although not successful, they fomented antagonism against the Norman overlords in the North. His son, Cnut the Holy, mounted another invasion in 1085, once again unsuccessful. Scandinavian activity

demanding King William's attention throughout his reign, and was a constant reminder that it was an Anglo-Danish England that the Normans had conquered, not a purely Saxon one. Among the observers of the Tapestry would be Anglo-Danes, English, Normans, and Anglo-Normans. William had to deal with trouble from all of them. The Bayeux Tapestry would serve as a warning to anybody who would interfere with his claim to be King of England – Danes included.

The Bayeux Tapestry's narrative presents the invasion of England as a personal conflict between William and Harold. It was meant to reinforce the theme that William had prevailed in battle because of the justness of his cause, and because it was God's will. It strengthens the Norman claim by not recognizing any other contenders for the throne. Hardrada's attempted invasion of Yorkshire is apparently ignored in the Bayeux Tapestry. But there is probably a reference to the activity in the North and the delay between the landing at Pevensey and the Battle at Hastings. This time-span is included in the Embroidery's narrative imagery with the foraging for provisions, the feast, the fortification construction at Hastings, and the activity of scouts and spies. This indicates that Harold and the English forces were elsewhere. It might also be that if the mysterious Aelfgyva is meant to refer to Aelfgyva of Northampton that this would be a recognizable statement that the Danish claims to the throne were illegitimate.

There is a project currently underway in Fulford to draw attention to the fighting which took place there. A team of local people is creating a five-meter long embroidery to commemorate the Battle.

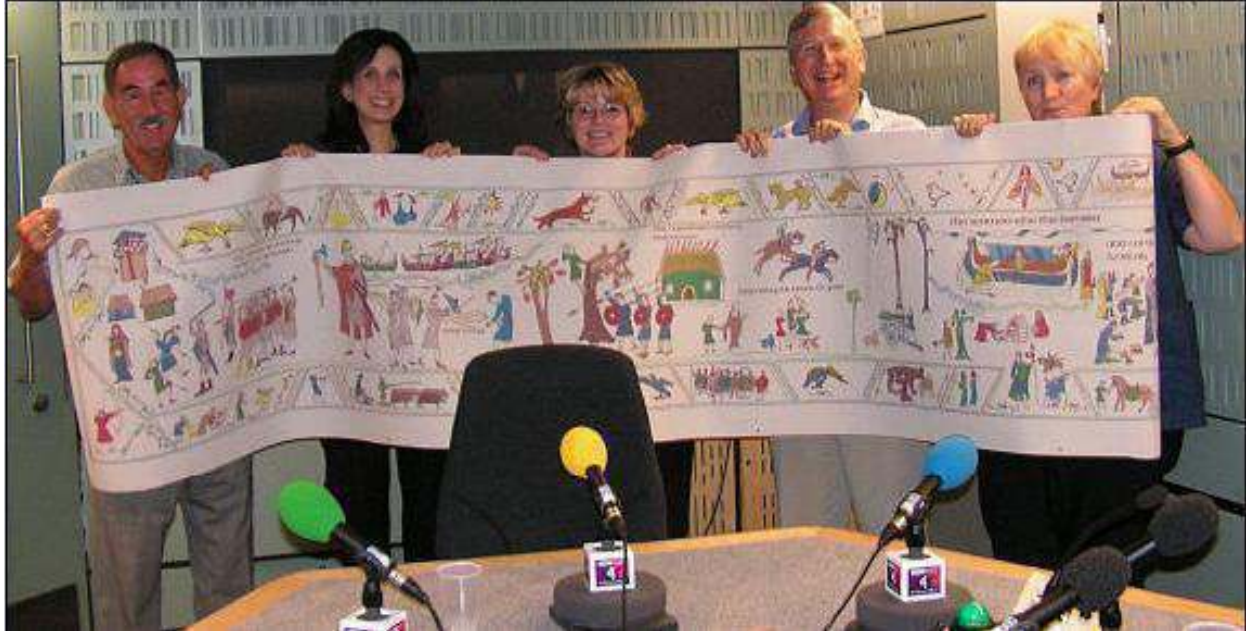


Figure 8: *The Fulford Tapestry team. Permission to print this image granted by Charles Jones, director of the Fulford project.*

It is designed in the style of the Bayeux Tapestry in order to link the Battle of Fulford with that at Hastings. It is a reminder that if the English had not been defeated at Fulford, requiring Harold to move his troops north, the outcome of the Battle at Hastings might have been very different.

The Fulford embroidery starts with the Norse landing at Scarborough,



Figure 9: Norse landing at Scarborough. Permission to print this image granted by Charles Jones, director of the Fulford project.

progresses through the fighting,



Figure 10: Fighting at Fulford. Permission to print this image granted by Charles Jones, director of the Fulford project.

and ends with Harald Hardrada entering York.



Figure 11: Harald Hardrada entering York. Permission to print this image granted by Charles Jones, director of the Fulford project.

It is a tribute to the Vikings and the role they played in determining who would be King of England, expressed with a reference to the Bayeux Tapestry!⁷

* * *

The Bayeux Tapestry's images are studied for the information they provide about material culture. Given the complex nature of eleventh-century English society, it would not have been possible for the designers of the Tapestry's images to ignore Scandinavian elements embedded in the material and visual culture of the time.⁸ But the Nordic factor

⁷ The project is also part of a campaign to preserve the site of the Battle of Fulford from being developed for housing – there is a plan to route an access road across the site. Charles Jones, *The Yorkshire Preface to the Bayeux Tapestry* (London: WritersPrintshop, 2005); for images of all the scenes, see http://www.battleoffulford.org.uk/bayeux_project.htm.

⁸ For a recent discussion of this issue, see John Micheal Crafton, *The Political Artistry of the Bayeux Tapestry* (Lewiston: Mellen, 2007), 81-92.

in English and Norman culture was not recognized until well after the Tapestry's rediscovery in the 1730s.

During the 18th century in the Scandinavian countries, interest was growing in the Nordic past and there were several translations of Old Norse literature. But the knowledge of Nordic mythology and history was scanty. In 1799, the University of Copenhagen undertook a campaign to replace Greek mythology with Nordic mythology in literature studies. In the 19th century, when the boundaries of the Scandinavian countries were constantly changing, patriotic societies were founded to promote research into the sagas and traditional history, national origins, and the vernacular. One such organization was the Gothic League (Götiska Förbundet) formed in Stockholm in 1811 by a group of young people who wished to provoke a nationalist movement in a country traumatized by the loss of Finland. Likewise, in Norway, which separated from Denmark but was united with Sweden in 1814, romantic nationalism in the 1830s and 40s sought to rediscover national roots. During this period, students and poets created the concept of an inclusive Scandinavian culture based on a common past. There was a nostalgia for the golden age of Scandinavian unity, a time when the Northmen were the most powerful force in Europe.⁹ **The Viking myth was born.** The term “Viking” became the preferred descriptor for these newly recreated heroes.¹⁰ The search for the recovery of Viking culture turned the attention of Scandinavian scholars to the study of the Bayeux Tapestry.

⁹ Eric Eydoux, “Les littératures du Nord et le temps du paganisme,” in *Dragons et Drakkers* (Caen : Musée de Normandie, 1996), 29-36 ; also Carin Orrling, “The Old Norse Dream,” in *Vikings, the North Atlantic Saga*, eds. W. Fitzhugh and E. Ward (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Books, 2000), 354-364.

¹⁰ Lucien Musset, “Vikings et drakkars: des questions de mots ,” in *Dragons et Drakkers*, 11-14, suggests that the term “viking” corresponds to the Old English *wicing*, used since the 6th century to designate pirates, and also to the word *vikingr*, attested in the Nordic world, to describe participants in maritime expeditions.

Hector Estrup, a Danish historian¹¹ who visited France in 1819-20, was one of these men. His journal was translated into French and published, ninety years later, in 1911 by his grandson, as a tribute for the Millénaire de Normandie, the celebrations of the founding of Normandy a thousand years earlier. It was described as a memoir of one of the first of the Danish scholars to have travelled through Normandy with the purpose of looking for the origins of his heritage.¹² Estrup described Bayeux as “the Danish town par excellence in Normandy.” When he visited the Bayeux Tapestry, Estrup was struck by features he associated with the Nordic heritage. His list included: i) William of Normandy’s garb, which is identical to that worn by Rollo on his sarcophagus;



Figure 12: *Rollo’s sarcophagus. The image is provided by Wikimedia Commons.*

¹¹Hector Frederik Jansen Estrup (1794-1846) was associated with the Academy of Sorø between 1822 and 1837.

¹² Estrup, 1911, 38-39; The complete publication is available online at <http://www.normannia.info/pdf/estrup1911.pdf>

- ii) the English wore mustaches while the Normans did not;
- iii) the northern drinking horns;



Figure 13: English drinking from horns. Detail from the Bayeux Tapestry – 11th Century
by special permission of the City of Bayeux.

iv) the knights' shields ornamented with painted figures, especially dragons and crosses;



Figure 14: Knights with shields. Detail from the Bayeux Tapestry – 11th Century by special permission of the City of Bayeux.

v) the ships carrying shields on the gunwales, the ships being of a form which recalls the long boats with which the inhabitants of Blankenese¹³ brave the fury of the waves;



¹³ Blankenese was a fishing village on the Elbe, near Hamburg; it is now part of greater Hamburg.



Figure 15: *Ships & shields. Detail from the Bayeux Tapestry – 11th Century by special permission of the City of Bayeux.*

vi) William's daughter wears a cloak similar to those worn by old women in Caen; and
(he noted that)

vii) there was no trace of Taillefer's juggling with the sword as described by Gaimar.

The Millénaire de Normandie took place in June 1911 and was a celebration of the culture and history of the duchy founded by Rollo a thousand years earlier through a treaty with Charles the Simple.¹⁴ Centered in a series of public spectacles, parades, concerts, and other events held in Rouen, it was meant to help create a Norman identity which would acknowledge the special nature of the province, differentiating it from the rest of France. One of the ways in which this could be achieved was to emphasize its Viking roots. This movement had actually begun somewhat earlier. In 1884, the Society for the History of Normandy published *le Dragon normand*, a twelfth-century epic attributed to Etienne de Rouen (died c.1169), a monk at Bec-Hellouin, which affirms the Nordic origins of Normandy and describes the followers of the Conqueror at Hastings as

¹⁴ V. Jean-Pierre Chaline, "Rouen 1911: le Millénaire de la Normandie," in *Dragons et Drakkars*, 71-78.

Danes.¹⁵ In this, the poem follows the precedent set by Dudo of St-Quentin (c.965-c.1043) who traced Norman origins back to the Dane, Rollo, in his *Historia Normannorum*.

For the Millénaire, there was an emphasis on the encompassing sentiment of “normandité,” Normanness. Interest in the thousand-year anniversary was expressed from countries far and wide which could claim a Norman imprint. There were participants not only from the Scandinavian countries, but also from North America, and many gifts were offered to the city of Rouen and the Norman people by these groups.¹⁶ All this contributed to the notion of a vast “Norman” community united by the memory of their common ancestor, Rollo, the legendary founder of the Norman dynasty. The statue of Rollo, sculpted by Letellier in 1869 for the city of Rouen, was particularly honored. The transmission of the story of Rollo led to the question – was he Danish or Norwegian? The Norwegian city of Aalesund, the legendary birthplace of Rollo, was given a copy of the statue by the city of Rouen. Fargo, North Dakota, with a population of Norwegian immigrants who had expressed interest in the celebrations, received the same gift.

¹⁵ *Le Dragon normand et autres pièces d'Etienne de Rouen, présentés par Henri Omont* (Rouen : Société de l'Histoire de Normandie, 1884). The poem was published in England shortly thereafter – Richard Howlitt, ed., *Draco Normannicus in Chronicles of the Reigns of Stephen, Henry II and Richard I* (London, 1885), 2: 646-647.

¹⁶ Jean-Marie Levesque, “Les cadeaux des pays scandinaves à la Ville de Rouen, à l’occasion du Millénaire de la Normandie, 1911,” in *Dragons et Drakkars*, 79-82.



Figure 16: *Rollo of Fargo.*

Two extravagant books were published soon after the celebrations : *Le Livre du Millénaire de la Normandie* and *Le Millénaire normand, souvenirs, études*. These were collections of scholarly articles discussing the art, literature, and history of Normandy from its inception until the beginning of the 20th century. In all of this, the Bayeux

Tapestry, which had been exhibited in the public library in Bayeux since 1842,¹⁷ seems to have played a surprisingly small role. Only the publication of Estrup's journal drew attention to the Scandinavian elements in the Tapestry's images. When a piece of narrative embroidery was found in the storage building of the church at Ofverhogdals, in Norway, in 1912, there was only a very summary note establishing a parallel with the Bayeux Tapestry.¹⁸ *Le Livre du Millénaire de la Normandie* included the paper read by Emile Travers at Bayeux in 1906, in which he suggested that the Bayeux Tapestry had been created in England, for Odo of Bayeux, between 1088 and 1092.¹⁹ The city of Rouen published the proceedings of a learned conference associated with the anniversary and included the opposing opinion that Eugene Anquetil had published in 1907 whereby he argued that the Tapestry had been created in Bayeux, for Bishop Odo, for exhibition at the dedication of his cathedral in 1077.²⁰ The Norman scholars failed to see the Embroidery as a visual affirmation of their Scandinavian roots.

In nineteenth-century literature, Vikings were often associated with ships. But nothing was known about the actual appearance of early Nordic vessels, and some of the illustrations were extremely fanciful. One good example is the engraving for the 1825 edition of *Frithiof's Saga*, a heroic poem composed by the Swedish author Esaias Tegnér, in which the Viking's boat was transformed into a fabulous dragon, probably following the description in the sagas.

¹⁷ Shirley Ann Brown, *The Bayeux Tapestry. History and Bibliography* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1988), 15.

¹⁸ Thn E., "Ofverhogdals-Tapeten," *Konst* (1 March 1912): 74-75.

¹⁹ Travers Emile, "La tapisserie de Bayeux," *Livre du Millénaire de la Normandie*, (Rouen and Paris: G. Ficker, 1911), 1:153-156.

²⁰ Eugène Anquetil, "Antiquité de la Tapisserie de Bayeux," *Congrès du Millénaire de la Normandie tenu à Rouen* (Rouen, 1912), 405-409.

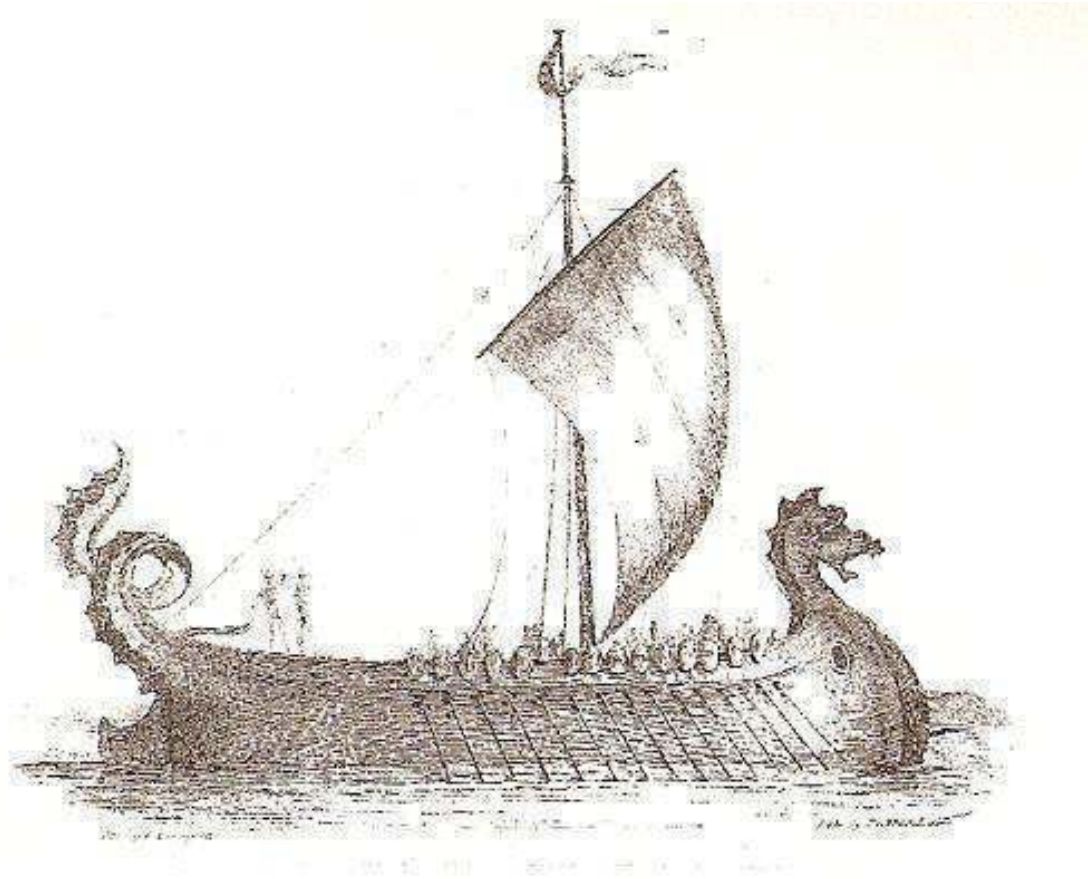


Figure 17: *Illustration of Ship from Tegnér's Frithiof's Saga, 1825.*

The discovery and excavation of the Norse ship at Gokstad in 1880, drew attention to the true appearance of Viking vessels. The similarity with the Bayeux Tapestry's ships was duly noted and people began to see links between Nordic, Norman, and English ships. For the World's Columbian Exposition held in Chicago in 1893, a full-size replica of the Gokstad boat was built in Norway.

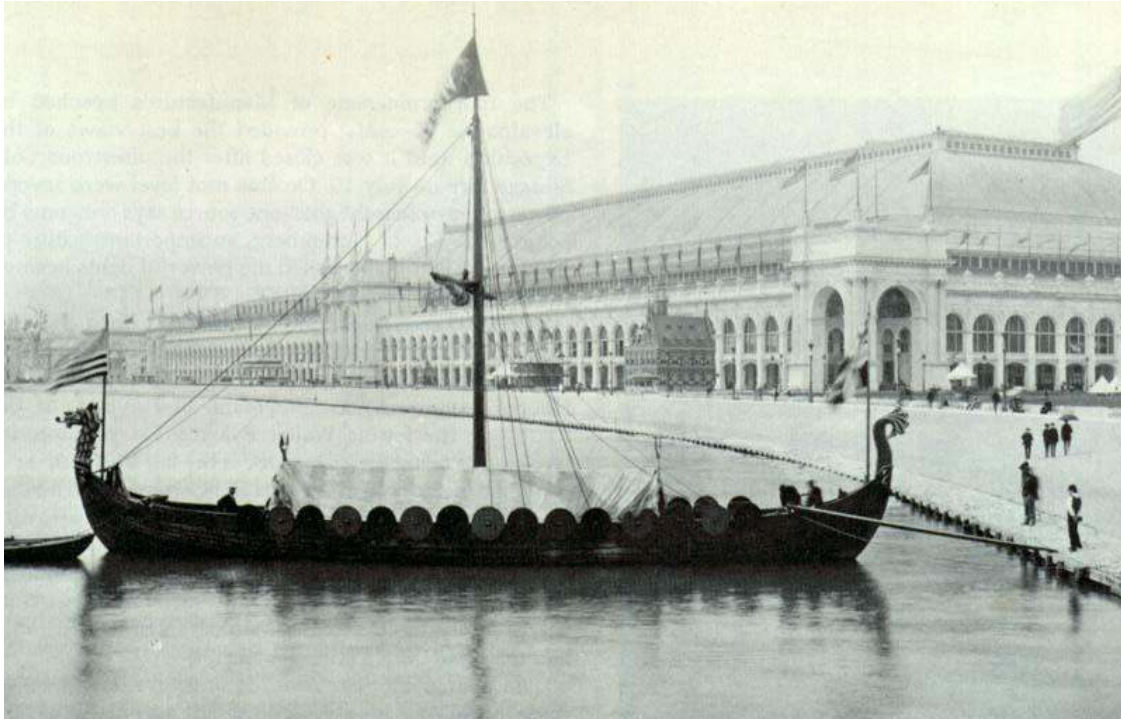


Figure 18: *Ship at World's Fair.* The image is provided by Wikimedia Commons.

It was sailed from Bergen, across the Atlantic to Newfoundland, then on to Cape Cod and New York, along the Erie Canal to the Great Lakes and on to Chicago.²¹ This was to affirm that Leif Erikson, the Viking, was the true discoverer of North America, some five hundred years before Christopher Columbus. Perhaps the images of the ships in the Tapestry were used to reconstruct the rather fanciful dragon with protruding tongue on the prow, since the Gokstad ship did not have an animal-headed prow. The arrangement of the shields along the gunwale is similar to that seen in the Tapestry (see **Figure 15**). From then on, the ships in the Embroidery were recognized as being the true “Viking” type.

²¹ Elisabeth Ward, “Reflections on an Icon: Vikings in American Culture,” in *Vikings. The North Atlantic Saga*, 365-373. Today, the *Viking* is exhibited in Good Templar Park, Geneva, Illinois, a Chicago suburb.

It was with the Gokstad discovery that Danish interest in the Bayeux Tapestry flourished. In 1885, a full-sized, colored, photographic reproduction of the Embroidery was exhibited in the Museum of National History in Frederiksborg Castle, near Copenhagen, where it still resides today.²² Johannes Steenstrup (1834-1935), professor of history at the University of Copenhagen and author of the guidebook, was an advocate of the theory that Rollo, the legendary founder of the Norman dynasty, was a Dane.²³ Thus, the Bayeux Tapestry could be claimed as an integral product of the greater Danish heritage. In the revised guidebook of 1925 by Johannes Brøndsted, there are references to the similarity between the Tapestry ships and excavated Viking boats; the Norman fighters are expressly equated with the Norse Vikings.²⁴

In 1933, Phyllis Ackerman, an American art historian, wrote about the Bayeux Tapestry as a reflection of Nordic culture, basing her argument primarily on literary sources.²⁵ She described the Tapestry as the greatest remaining monument of the art of the Norsemen, claiming that the eleventh-century Normans were still essentially Norse. She saw the true theme of the Bayeux Embroidery to be the sanctity of the oath, the central motive of the Norse code of honor. When Harold accompanies William on the Brittany Campaign, he fulfills the Norse expectation that a guest was expected to fight like one of his host's own retainers. The banquet preceding a great battle is a commonplace in Norse literature. She sees Vital as a herald who, according to Norse

²² This reproduction must be an exemplar of the first photographic facsimile of the Tapestry made by E. Dossetter in 1871-1872.

²³ Johannes C. H. R. Steenstrup, *Bayeux-Tapetet*, (Copenhagen, 1885), 32; translated into German and republished in 1905; see 34.

²⁴ Johannes Brøndsted, "Bayeux-Tapetet," *Frem* 51 (1925): 820-833, at 826, detail 40.

custom, communicates between the two enemies, giving formal announcement of the impending contest, challenge, and reply. When William sends messengers to Ponthieu to rescue Harold there are two cocks in the border, one golden and one dark red.



Figure 19: Section of Bayeux Tapestry with cocks in upper border. Detail from the Bayeux Tapestry – 11th Century by special permission of the City of Bayeux.

To the Norsemen cocks were the herald of doom for a cock with a golden crest and a deep red cock from the netherworld would crow to announce the end of the world. Thus we have a Nordic presaging of the end of Harold's world. Ackerman alluded to the Scandinavian belief that each man has his guardian, his *fylgja*, in the form of an animal representative of his character. She established a tie between Edward and the lion,

²⁵ Phyllis Ackerman, "The Norsemen and their Descendents," in *Tapestry: The Mirror of Civilization*

Harold and the hawk, William and the leopard, Turolde with the goose, and Guy de Ponthieu with the levrier (French racing dog), but she did not indicate exactly how this was carried out in the Tapestry. Ackerman described Harold's standard as a dragon "made to inflate with the wind as if the real beast itself were keeping watch."

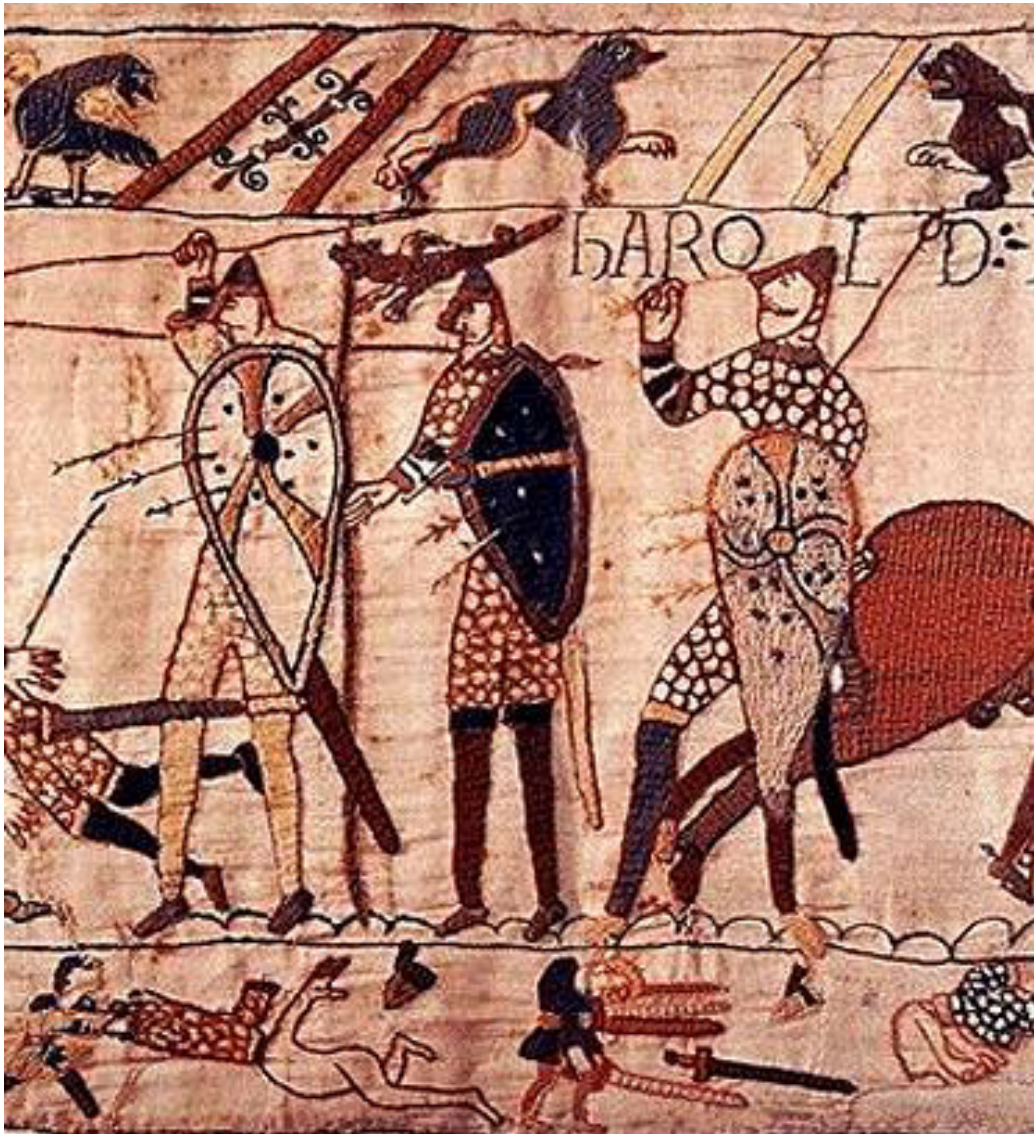


Figure 20: *Harold with dragon standard. Detail from the Bayeux Tapestry – 11th Century by special permission of the City of Bayeux.*

(1933; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), 39-53, 348-351.

This she relates to the banner Sigurd's mother made for him when he went to war, as described in the *Volsungasaga*: "It was in the shape of a raven, and when the wind blew on it, it seemed as if it spread its wings." The dragon and the raven were attributes of Odin, god of War.

In a similar vein, Lucien Musset in 1951 remarked upon the similarity in shape between William's quarter-circle flag and the metal standard or weathervane in the Ringerike style, from Norway.²⁶



Figure 21: "Weathervane" battle-standard. Detail from the Bayeux Tapestry – 11th Century by special permission of the City of Bayeux.

²⁶ Lucien Musset, "Récentes contributions scandinaves à l'exégèse de la Tapisserie de Bayeux," *Bulletin de la Société des Antiquaires de Normandie* 51 (1948-51): 275-279.

E. M. C. Barraclough noticed the bird design on the standard and equated this with the “Raven Flag of the Vikings which had been retained by their descendants, the Normans.”²⁷

The belief that the mid-eleventh century Normans should still be considered Vikings, or at least Northmen, reached its epitome during the Nazi period in Germany, with the study of the Tapestry undertaken by the *Institut allemand d’histoire de l’art* in Paris. One of the main investigators was Professor Herbert Jankuhn, an archaeologist from the University of Rostock, who had lead the archaeological investigation of the Viking settlement at Hedeby (Haithabu) from 1930-39. The earlier Danish exploration of Hedeby had been taken over by the *Ahnenerbe*, the Institution for the Study of Ancestral History and Culture, with the purpose of investigating the early material culture of the Germanic peoples. The Bayeux Tapestry was seen as a monument of the Normans, who were themselves Vikings, who were themselves part of the Germanic peoples. The promised book was never published, but the German project was the first attempt to study the Tapestry in a comprehensive, detailed, and professional manner, by a team of trained scholars from different fields. One immediately sees the similarity with the study overseen by Sir Frank Stenton in 1957.²⁸

After WWII, there was more attention paid to the Scandinavian elements apparent in the Bayeux Tapestry. The discovery, in Denmark, of the eleventh-century Skuldelev ships in Roskilde fjord in 1957 yielded the most valuable information about the vessels depicted in the Embroidery. They proved that although there was a small amount of

²⁷ E. M. C. Barraclough, “The Flags in the Bayeux Tapestry,” *Armi Antichi* 1 (1969): 117-125, at 119.

²⁸ Sir Frank Stenton, ed., *A Comprehensive Study of the Bayeux Tapestry* (London: Phaidon, 1957).

artistic license exercised in their depictions, the ships in the Bayeux Tapestry were remarkably authentic.

The Danish stamp issued in 1970 appropriated the ship-building scene in the Bayeux Tapestry.



Figure 22: Danish stamp.

It links the legendary maritime skills of the Danish Vikings and that of their Norman cousins. In 1982, the Viking Ship Museum in Roskilde undertook the building of a replica of a Viking ship. They chose a small cargo ship about fourteen meters long from the Skuldelev group.



Figure 23: *Skuldelev Ship 3. The image is provided by Wikimedia Commons.*

The aim was to use construction techniques and tools as close as possible to the originals. The techniques were inferred from salvaged parts, from faint tool marks on the original, and from the Bayeux Tapestry. In fact, the Tapestry is the sole contemporary source that we have for boat-building techniques in the mid-Middle Ages. It took two years to build the ship they dubbed *Roar Ege* (pronounced *Ro-ar Ee-ye*) (Roar's Oak Ship). The tools

used closely resemble those in the ship-building scene in the Embroidery. The felling axe, the broad axe, the small shaping axe, the spoon drill (breast auger), and adze were all similar to those attested in the Embroidery. The depiction of the stemsmith checking the lines of the boat by eye suggested the importance of the use of the eye to align the pieces and to check measurements.



Figure 24: *Eye-measuring in the Tapestry. Detail from the Bayeux Tapestry – 11th Century by special permission of the City of Bayeux.*

The sea performance of the vessel was perfect. *Roar Ege* has been described as “a voyager through time and a tangible reminder of the spirit of an amazing age.”²⁹

²⁹ Henrik Juel, *Roar's Circle – a Viking Ship returns to the Sea* (Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 2006).



Figure 25: Roar Ege

The little ship in the Norman fleet has been brought back to life through the efforts of a team of Scandinavian builders and ship-lovers. Today's Vikings still provide tangible links with the past.

There has been a continuing reciprocal relationship between the Bayeux Tapestry and archaeology. The excavation of the Viking ringed fort at Trelleborg, published in 1948,³⁰ made possible a comparison between the “hog-backed” Danish house and the buildings in the Bayeux Tapestry.

³⁰ Poul Nørlund, *Trelleborg* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1948); for an extract in English, *Trelleborg* (London: Committee of the Exhibition of Danish Art Treasures, 1948.)



Figure 26: Hogback house at Trelleborg. The image is provided by Wikimedia Commons. Detail from the Bayeux Tapestry – 11th Century by special permission of the City of Bayeux.

Lucien Musset suggested that these buildings with the curving rooflines were adopted in Anglo-Danish England, and from there found their way into the Tapestry's repertoire of buildings.³¹ There are other items which can be related to finds from Norway and Denmark, items such as the curved tool held by the man wading to the ship at Bosham,

³¹ Lucien Musset, *Récentes contributions scandinaves à l'exégèse de la Tapisserie de Bayeux*, 275-279; and further developed in Anne-Marie Flambard Hericher, "Archaeology and the Bayeux Tapestry," in *The Bayeux Tapestry: Embroidering the Facts of History* (Caen: Presses universitaires de Caen, 2004), 261-287, at 273-277.

the anchor of the ship landing at Ponthieu, the beasts on the prows of the ships, the animal-headed posts on furniture. Swords found in Danish sites are very similar to those found in the Tapestry.³²

Nordic connections have been discerned in the military tactics seen in the Bayeux Tapestry. Parallels between the Battle at Stiklestad, fought in Norway in 1030, and the Battle of Hastings as depicted in the Tapestry were pointed out by A.W.Brøgger, the Norwegian archaeologist. At Stiklestad, the role of the archers was decisive in the outcome. Brøgger suggested that since the Bayeux Tapestry shows the use of archers by both sides, that both the English and the Normans had learned this tactic from the Scandinavians.³³

³² David M. Wilson, *The Bayeux Tapestry* (London, Thames and Hudson, 2004), 213-227; also Rikke Behrend, "Vandfundne svaerd fra middelalderen," *Nationalmuseets Arbejdsmark* (Copenhagen, 1970), 89-102.

³³ A. W. Brøgger, *Stiklestadslaget* (Oslo, 1946); also Lucien Musset, "Récentes contributions scandinaves à l'exégèse de la Tapisserie de Bayeux," 275-279.



Figure 27: French and English archers in the Tapestry. Detail from the Bayeux Tapestry – 11th Century by special permission of the City of Bayeux.

The Bayeux Tapestry has often been studied in connection with English and French historical writings as well as with English epic poetry and the French *chanson-de-geste*. With the exception of the study of Ackerman, the Tapestry's narrative and images are very rarely compared to the Scandinavian sagas, perhaps because of their later

dating.³⁴ But Marit Monsen Wang has interpreted the symbol of the portal under which Aelfgyva stands in the Tapestry as reflective of an ancient Nordic concept: the portal between this mortal life and that of the other-world as described in the Scandinavian *Eddas*.

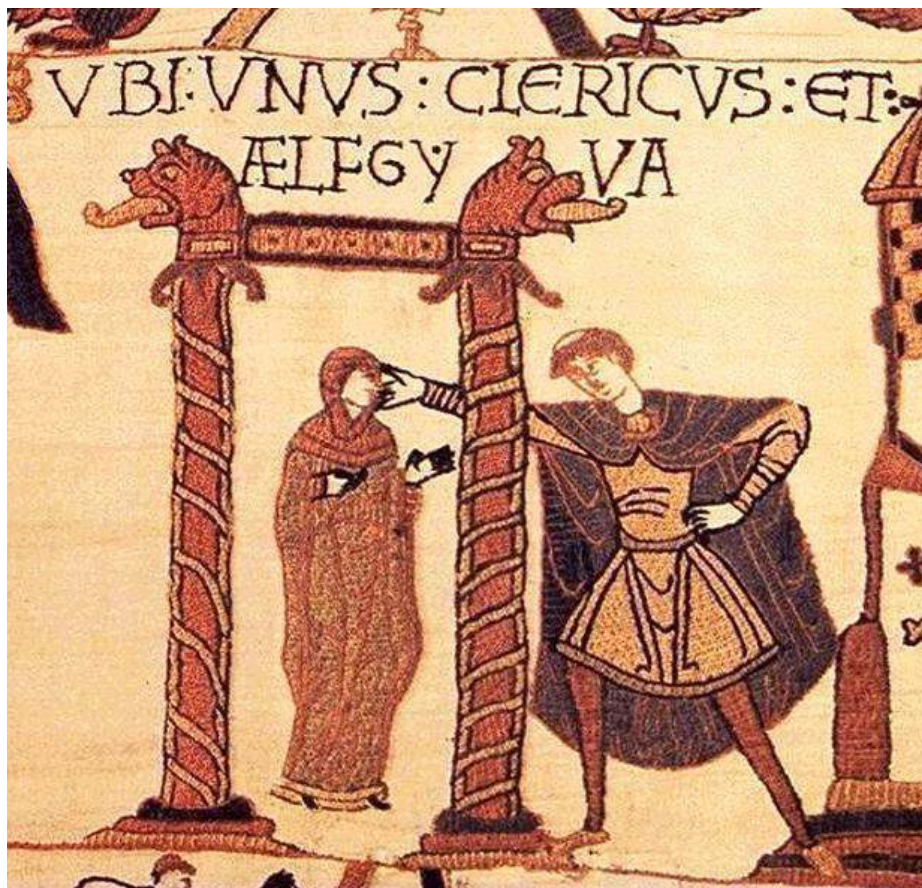


Figure 28: *Aelfgyva. Detail from the Bayeux Tapestry – 11th Century by special permission of the City of Bayeux*

Monsen Wang also traces this theme in the *Risala*, the description of an encounter between an Arab traveler and the Russian Vikings in the 10th century. She refers specifically to the funeral rituals of the Viking king described in detail in the tale.³⁵ As

³⁴ The earliest manuscript dates from the 13th century.

³⁵ Marit Monsen, "Portalsymbolikk," *Viking* 34 (1970): 73-96.

she puts it, the argument seems a bit far-fetched, but there will undoubtedly be more said about it. Other researchers have drawn attention to the Scandinavian character of the framing doorway.

Tribute must be given to the research of the late Lucien Musset, professor of history at the University of Caen. His publications are consulted in all the studies of Nordic elements in the Bayeux Tapestry. Recognizing the Scandinavian elements in the different cultures of north-west Europe during the Middle Ages, Musset was the pre-eminent transmitter of the influence of this heritage on our understanding of the Tapestry.

During the twentieth century, the Scandinavians, the Vikings, and the Bayeux Tapestry became intricately linked once more. It is possible to see the Scandinavians, and perhaps the Vikings, as the common link between opposing camps, as the common element in both England and Normandy. Rather than interpreting the Bayeux Tapestry as an Anglo-Norman document, we should see it as a reflection of the more nuanced society the Conquest produced, one that combined English, Anglo-Danish, and Norman cultures. In the preface to his book, *The Bayeux Tapestry and the Battle of Hastings*, Mogens Rud explains that his interest in the subject has been spurred by one fact: “I am a Dane and as such a kinsman of both the Anglo-Saxons and the Normans.”³⁶ That statement says it all.

³⁶ Mogens Rud, *The Bayeux Tapestry and the Battle of Hastings 1066*, trans. Chris Bojesen, (1983; Copenhagen: Eilers, 2001), 8.

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